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Introduction

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The Russian media system at a crossroads

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Abstract

This special issue provides a timely reflection on the Russian media system, which is currently at a crossroads. In this introduction, we provide a brief overview of previous theorisations of the post-Soviet Russian media and suggest that they seemingly go in waves. The first wave, to our mind, is linked to the analysis of the perestroika's 'Glasnost' and the dramatic shifts following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This wave is followed by an attempt to reflect on the nationwide processes of media around the mid-2000s. The third wave coincides with the regulatory changes in 2010s and is informed by the pronounced technological changes affecting media industries and growing Internet penetration in the country. This special issue potentially feeds into a new wave of conceptualisation, as it revisits previous assertions of the inherent duality of the Russian media system. The five articles contributing to this special issue in one way or another argue that this dualism constitute the characteristic enduring nature of the Russia media. The authors reflect on applicability of existing media theories to Russian context as well as offer an up-to-date account of diverse journalist practices, regional differences and converging media sub-systems in Russia.

Introduction

Theorisations about the Russian media seemingly go in waves. The first wave, to our minds, is linked to the analysis of the perestroika's '*Glasnost*' and the dramatic shifts following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. de Smaele (1999), McNair (2000), Mickiewicz

(1999), Vartanova (2002) and Zassoursky (2004) are some of the scholars who conceptualised the developments within the post-Soviet Russian media. This first wave of research was more of an attempt to describe and systematise a Russian media system in flux, sometimes with reference to existing Western-based media models. This wave was followed by an attempt to reflect on the nationwide processes of media around and after the mid-2000s (Beumers et al., 2008; Koltsova, 2006; Roudakova, 2008). Here, more attention was given to different media sectors and to the relationship between media and power. The second wave dealt with a more stabilised media landscape in which the interplay of economic structures and political factors became more apparent (e.g. Koltsova, 2006), and it featured an increasingly nuanced understanding of mass media products and their reception (e.g. Hutchings and Rulyova, 2009).

The third wave is informed by the pronounced technological changes affecting media industries and growing Internet penetration in the country. The Russian media have been called a two-tier, dichotomous media system ‘where some outlets, notably national TV, [were] very tightly controlled, while others, including the Internet, [were] allowed a substantial degree of freedom’ (Dunn, 2014, p. 1425). Whilst the changes in press legislation and regulation in the 2010s signal a tightening regulation of the online sphere, the control and co-optation of the media in Russia is not as uniform as it might seem (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013; Lehtisaari, 2015; Oates, 2013). There are manifestations of alternative voices in the state-controlled traditional media, such as TV (Hutchings & Tolz, 2015).

However, the sustained role of traditional media in Russia (Hutchings & Tolz, 2015) despite the process of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006), the persistence of post/Soviet values and approaches in journalistic practice (the lack of a tradition of investigative reporting, etc.) calls for a reconceptualisation of Russian media and the journalistic profession. The book by Natalia Roudakova, ‘Losing Pravda’ (2017), which Joanna Szostek reviews in this special issue, addresses some of these recent dilemmas. Our special issue further informs this latest

wave. The articles included on changing media landscapes in Russia strive to conceptualise how recent legal and market changes might impact Russian national and regional media development.

It also resonates with recent studies that strive to place the Russian media system in a wider, post-Soviet (e.g. Becker, 2018) or BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) context (e.g. Vartanova, 2015). A broader perspective is indispensable in light of the rapidly changing information landscape in a so-called ‘post-fact’ (Fukuyama, 2017) society, where one of the soft power tools of Russian government – an international multi-language broadcaster RT – plays a crucial role (Miazhevich, 2018). Further relevant forthcoming publications are expected to originate from the work of the Russian Media Lab², a multidisciplinary research project and international network focusing on the Russian media and freedom of expression. This three-year project, which started in 2016, examines the execution of state control mechanisms, censorship and the remaining ‘spaces’ of independent reporting.

The five articles selected for this special issue offer an up-to-date account of diverse journalist practices, regional differences and converging media sub-systems in Russia. Special attention is given to media theories, raising the question of new approaches. The first two articles by Ilya Kiriya and Elena Vartanova provide an overarching view of contemporary Russian media and account for a more general trend in the Russian mediascape. The other three articles explore more specific fields such as the effect of digitalisation (Andrei Vyrkovsky et al.), regional trends (Olga Dovbysh) and ethnic media trends (Gladkova et al.). This special issue foregrounds the scholarship produced by Russian scholars based on the assumption that they focus on the most pertinent issues from the national point of view, have hands-on access to local resources and demonstrate an awareness of the latest trends and processes. This issue concludes with Joanna Szostek’s book review and a conference report by Anna Gladkova

evaluating the *Tenth International Media Readings* in Moscow: ‘Mass Media and Communications – 2018’.

Ilya Kiriya’s paper ‘New and old institutions within the Russian media system’ offers a novel approach to scrutinising the current duality of the Russian media system. Kiriya argues for going beyond conceptualisations of Russian media as transitional; instead, he proposes interpreting the current media system in terms of institutional conflict between norms artificially introduced from ‘above’ and the grassroots informal rules built into market agents’ and audiences’ everyday practices. The norms based on a neo-liberal representation of the media system presupposing the media’s financial independence from the state and a ‘news culture’ different from a ‘propaganda culture’ do not easily combine with the informal rules based on the paternalistic role of the state and the fragmentation of the public sphere. Kiriya claims that the interaction of these elements forms the unstable and indeterminate nature of the Russian media system.

The article by Elena Vartanova, ‘Russian media: A call for theorising the economic change’, explores the present state of the Russian media industry with the view of problematising its current trends and processes such as commercialisation, digitalisation and deregulation, explaining them as conditioned by both universal market-driven and nationally determined forces. Here, the role of the post-Soviet legacy becomes an important factor informing a nationally specific mediascape.

In their article ‘Convergence as a challenge to journalists in Russia’, Vyrkovsky et al. explore the impact of on-going digitalisation on newsroom work. The article brings together an analysis of federal and online media sites and survey data. Correspondents’ and editors’ responses indicate changes in their production routine, which becomes more intense as they package their content for different platforms. At the same time, the general level of

‘multimediatization’ is low, with the majority of media texts utilising only one element (either photographs or videos).

Anna Gladkova and her research team analyse the current state of ethnic media outlets (print, broadcast and online) in Russia in three national republics of Russia (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Chuvashia) in their article ‘Ethnic media in Russia: Between state model and alternative voices’. The ethnic media here are the ones produced in the languages of the biggest ethnic groups living in these areas (the Tatar, the Bashkir and the Chuvash). Using open data, the authors explore the peculiarities of funding options (the state and alternative sources of financing) and ownership depending on the republic. As a result, they try to predict whether ethnic media in Russia follow the traditional state model (being primarily state-owned and state-funded) or shift toward an ‘alternative’ (i.e. non-state) model.

Finally, Olga Dovbysh’s article ‘Commercial or public service actors? Controversies in the nature of Russia’s regional mass media’ looks at regional media, which is typically the least-studied part of the Russian media system. Her research design is grounded in an analytical review of secondary sources and is supported by 14 in-depth interviews with media professionals from five Russian regions. The data show that Russian regional media outlets adopt a ‘dual identity’, perceiving themselves both as market and as public service actors, thus demonstrating a vague understanding of their place and function in society.

In a way, the final article brings us back to the dilemma raised in the first article of this special issue, confirming that the Russian media system is currently at a crossroads. The inherent duality of the Russian media system seems to constitute the characteristic enduring nature of the Russia media. However, how this duality will be shaped in light of the on-going media convergence (e.g. Russia’s switch from the analogue to the digital television broadcasting should be completed in 2019), the contentious national economic and legislative changes, the peculiarities of the post/Soviet journalistic culture, the ‘weaponisation of

information' trend (Pomerantsev, 2014) and changing media consumption habits remains to be seen.

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